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LEADERS AND THEIR INSTITUTIONS

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The Stalinist regime was one of the most tyrannical regimes in human history. It is therefore not surprising that scholars should be interested in knowing more about the genesis of such a system, about Stalin as a personality, and about the nature of the regime: how it was organised, how it worked; what measure of influence was exerted by other leaders apart from Stalin, and what influence institutional lobbies or social pressures had in shaping this regime. These questions have a wider significance, because the nature of the political regime had a direct bearing on the way in which policy was formulated, and on the way in which the system evolved over time (on these matters see the chapter by Davies).

KNOWLEDGE PRIOR TO THE OPENING OF THE ARCHIVES

Before the party and governmental archives began to be opened from the early 1990s onward our knowledge on the workings of the Soviet system was patchy. We relied on a limited number of sources: official pronouncements, laws and resolutions passed by leading party and government bodies, the speeches and statements by leading figures, press and journal articles, and accounts by émigrés. Our knowledge of the 1920s, when debate was more open, was greater than for the 1930s and the 1940s. We studied the

party-state apparatus to explain the way in which the political system had changed from the 1920s; the impact of the defeat of the Left and Right opposition, the drive toward greater internal party discipline, the closure of debate, and the rise of Stalin to supreme power.

Prior to the opening of the archives historians of all tendencies recognized the profound changes in the Soviet political system that were associated with the rise of Stalin. Within the party there was the decline in the influence of the party congress and the Central Committee, and the concentration of power within the central party bodies—the Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat. With this went a decline of the party itself: the end of internal party democracy, the institution of regular purges of the party ranks, the transition of the party from a forum of policy debate into an instrument for managing the economy, and the shift from the recruitment of proletarians into the party to a recruitment policy that, after 1939, favored those with higher education.

Alongside the changes in the party went major changes in the state apparatus: first, the growing importance of the economic administrative apparatus, reflected in the proliferation of economic commissariats; second, the growing role of the NKVD, associated with collectivization, “dekulakization,” the administration of the burgeoning labor camp system, and the growing suppression of internal dissent; third, the growing role of the military, associated with the threat posed by Japan in the Far East, and by Germany under Hitler from 1933 onward.

All this was generally accepted. The developments in the 1930s were seen by most scholars as confirming the transition to a “totalitarian” regime, exhibiting the six points elaborated by Friedrich and Brzezinski, who viewed the political system as a pyramidal structure, within which conflict between institutions was consciously devised to maximize the leaders’ personal power, in which the flow of influence was overwhelmingly top-down, and

in which the society was reduced to an inert, atomized mass.¹ An alternative perspective was offered by Trotsky, who sought to analyze developments from a Marxist perspective, depicting Stalinism as a form of Soviet Bonapartism, which was characterized by the rise in the power of the bureaucracy.²

Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 and his subsequent memoirs added flesh to the bones.³ From 1934 onward, Khrushchev argued, the system of collective leadership within the Politburo broke down, allowing the establishment of Stalin's personal dictatorship, euphemistically referred to as the "cult of personality." Thereafter major policies emanated from Stalin—the purges were largely his creation; the blunders of June 1941 and the early phase of the war were his responsibility; errors in the period of postwar construction were his.

Various sources sought to fill in the details concerning the internal workings of the Soviet political system in this period. One account, which appears to originate with Boris Nicolaevsky, asserted that from 1930 onward the Politburo was split between two factions—liberal and hard-line.⁴ At crucial stages Stalin's power was checked by the Politburo. His demand for the execution of M. N. Ryutin in 1932, it was asserted, was blocked by the Politburo. In these struggles Stalin tended to occupy the middle ground, until the deaths of Gosplan chairman V. V. Kuibyshev in 1934 and Commissar of Heavy Industry G. K. Ordzhonikidze in 1937, when the balance shifted to the hard-liners whom Stalin then backed. Another account, again originating with Nicolaevsky, argued that at the XVII Party Congress a disgruntled faction in the party sought to canvass opinion on removing Stalin from

1. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (New York: Praeger, 1956).

2. L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (London: New Park, 1967; first published 1937).

3. N. S. Khrushchev, *The Secret Speech*, ed. Zh. Medvedev and R. Medvedev (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1976).

4. Boris Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite* (London, 1960).

the post of General Secretary and replacing him with the supposedly more moderate S. M. Kirov, party chief of Leningrad. This was the reason for the murder of Kirov (at which Khrushchev hinted at the XX Party Congress in 1956) and the subsequent annihilation of most of the Central Committee elected in 1934 and a large proportion of the XVII Party Congress delegates.

Exactly how much power Stalin exercised remained unclear. Some argued that already at the time of Lenin's death in 1924 Stalin was the effective ruler of the country. Others stressed the celebrations of his fiftieth birthday in December 1929 as marking the establishment of his personal dictatorship and the growth of the Stalin "cult." Some saw the terror of 1936–1938 as the period when he established his unquestioned power.

Prior to the opening of the archives historians sought to piece together how the central party and government bodies worked in practice, particularly using accounts emanating from Soviet émigrés. The most comprehensive attempt to analyze these processes was undertaken by Niels Erik Rosenfeldt in his book *Knowledge and Power*, which placed great emphasis on the subdepartments of the Secretariat and Orgburo, and on Stalin's private office, as the main centers in which policy was formulated and its implementation supervised, and control over cadres regulated. Within this system a key role was assigned to Stalin's private secretary, A. N. Pokrebyshv.⁵

In the 1980s as part of the general reappraisal of Soviet history by a younger generation of historians most of these basic assumptions were called into question. J. Arch Getty in his reinterpretation of the terror in his 1985 book *The Origins of the Great Purges* questioned much of the work written on the 1930s, particularly as it related to how central a role Stalin played in events;

5. Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, *Knowledge and Power: The Role of Stalin's Secret Chancellery in the Soviet System of Government* (Copenhagen, 1978). A more wide-ranging survey of the Stalinist party-state apparatus (before the opening of the archives) is provided by Graeme J. Gill, *The Origins of the Stalinist Political System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

he argued that the influence of other individuals and even groups within the higher party leadership should be examined. Central to this new “revisionist” approach was the argument that the totalitarian version distorted the true nature of the Soviet regime, which should be viewed much more in terms of a system of bureaucratic politics and social pressures, a system of imperfect controls, in which Stalin and the leaders around him were not fully in control.

The opening of the party and state archives has given scholars access to the stenographic reports of the Central Committee plenums, to the protocols of the Politburo, and even, for some privileged scholars, access to the Politburo’s special files (*osobaya papka*). In addition, we have the correspondence between Stalin and his leading deputies V. M. Molotov and L. M. Kaganovich, for the early 1930s.⁶ We now also have the appointments diary of those who met Stalin in his Kremlin office throughout the period.⁷ Interviews with Stalin’s closest deputies add further insights.⁸ The availability of the protocols of the Soviet government’s Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) has also greatly increased our understanding of the decision-making process.

THE CENTRAL PARTY BODIES: THE POLITBURO

From its formal establishment in 1919 the Politburo was the supreme decision-making body in the ruling Communist Party. It was formally elected by the party Central Committee and was answerable before the party Central Committee and party congress. The Politburo in the 1920s acquired immense power and status, but its work was always shrouded in mystery. After 1922

6. Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg V. Khlevnyuk, eds., *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov 1925–36* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995); R. W. Davies et al., eds., *The Stalin-Kaganovich Letters* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, forthcoming).

7. *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 1994, no. 6; 1995, nos. 2, 3, 4, 5–6; 1997, no. 1; 1998, no. 4.

8. F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow, 1991); F. Chuev, *Tak govoril Kaganovich* (Moscow, 1993).

leadership of the Politburo became associated with the post of party General Secretary, Stalin's position in the party. With the progressive fusion of the party and state institutions, the Politburo was recognized as not only the supreme party body but also the ultimate authority to which all other institutions, including the Soviet government, headed by Sovnarkom, were subordinate.

With the opening of the archives Stalin's stature in the 1920s now appears greater than was previously appreciated. Stalin played a decisive role in policy making from the time of Lenin's death onward. Stalin was not, as has commonly been asserted, a poor third, an undistinguished mediocrity after Trotsky and G. E. Zinoviev contending for the succession. He was, in fact, among those in the know, the favorite to succeed Lenin. He was already reputed as a skilled political fighter, a man with a formidable capacity for administrative work, and known for his independent cast of mind and iron will. The defeat of the Left and Right Oppositions consolidated his control over the Politburo, but from 1928 to 1932 the Politburo remained a force, although Stalin was certainly more than *primus inter pares* within the ruling oligarchy. Policy declarations by Stalin were seen as having as much, if not more, authority than a decision by the Politburo collectively.

But Stalin triumphed not only because he was able to bend events to his will but also because of his ability to adapt himself to circumstances. Though Stalinism as a regime was in many ways fundamentally different from Leninism, the knowledge that we now have of the early Bolshevik regime (particularly of the Red Terror of 1918 and of Bolshevik policies of repression) suggest that the interconnection between the two was much stronger than previously understood. The period of the New Economic Policy of the 1920s now appears as a brief interlude between War Communism and the Stalinist "revolution from above," and the possibilities of an alternative third way (whether that espoused by L. D. Trotsky, or that advanced by N. I. Bukharin) appear more tenuous. This revolution set in train profound changes in the organization of the party-state apparatus and in state-societal relations that marked the Soviet regime until its demise in 1991.

Even regular meetings of the Politburo from 1924 to 1930 did not guarantee collective decision making. In the years 1923–1925 Trotsky complained repeatedly that Stalin and his allies resolved key decisions prior to the Politburo's meetings. L. B. Kamenev at the XIV Party Congress in 1926 bitterly denounced the near-dictatorial powers of the General Secretary. In 1928 the Right opposition were outmaneuvered in the Politburo by Stalin's ruse as General Secretary of according casting votes to members of the presidium of the Central Control Commission (TsKK). In the autumn of 1930 S. E. Syrtsov, in an outspoken attack on Stalin, protested at the decline of the Politburo as a collective decision-making body, with certain members being excluded from its deliberations.⁹

The defeat of the Right in 1929 allowed Stalin to consolidate the dominant position of his own faction within the party leadership. The Politburo following the Central Committee plenum of February 4, 1932, consisted of the following members:¹⁰

MEMBERS

I. V. Stalin	General Secretary
L. M. Kaganovich	party secretary, secretary Moscow party organization
S. M. Kirov	secretary of Leningrad party organization
S. V. Kosior	secretary of Ukrainian party organization
V. M. Molotov	chairman of Sovnarkom
V. V. Kuibyshev	chair of Gosplan
G. K. Ordzhonikidze	commissar of Heavy Industry
A. A. Andreev	commissar of Transportation
K. E. Voroshilov	commissar of Defense
M. Kalinin	chairman of the Central Executive Committee USSR

9. O. V. Khlevynuk et al., eds., *Stalinskoe Politbyuro v 30–3 gody: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 94–112.

10. E. A. Rees, ed., *Decision-Making in the Stalinist Command Economy, 1932–37* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 9–10.

CANDIDATES

A. I. Mikoyan	commissar of Supply
V. Ya. Chubar'	chairman of Sovnarkom Ukraine SSR
G. I. Petrovskii	chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Ukraine SSR

The ten full members and three candidate members reflected a particular system of representation at the highest level of the party. The heads of the main party and government institutions were always represented: the General Secretary of the party, the chairman of Sovnarkom, and the chairman of the Central Executive Committee USSR. The most important local party bodies (Moscow, Leningrad, and the Ukraine), and key institutions, like Gosplan, and the commissariats of defense, heavy industry, and rail transport, were also represented. The head of the Central Control Commission (TsKK), which was responsible for enforcing party discipline, was required during his term of office to formally surrender his membership of the Politburo, but he attended its meetings. All members of the Central Committee and of the Presidium of the Central Control Commission were entitled to attend Politburo meetings, but without voting rights. A typical meeting on March 28, 1929, had in attendance eight Politburo members, three Politburo candidate members, twenty-two Central Committee members, eleven Central Committee candidate members, and seven members of the presidium of the Central Control Commission

The Politburo's protocols provide a great deal of information about decision making in the Stalin era. They list those attending, the agenda of the meeting, and the decisions taken, often with the text of the approved resolutions appended. The protocols were signed by Stalin, and after 1930, in his absence, by Kaganovich, the second Secretary. The protocols, however, are not stenographic reports of the Politburo meetings (which apparently do not exist) and from them alone it is impossible to deduce the positions taken by individuals in policy disputes. The protocols provide no information on voting in the Politburo; the working

practice was to proceed on the basis of consensus, avoiding the divisive practice of voting on issues. The protocols provide little information on the way business was conducted, although from other sources it appears that the meetings were generally chaired by Molotov.

The Politburo concentrated on six main areas of policy: international affairs, defense, internal security, heavy industry, agriculture, and transport. The protocols are least revealing regarding the first three, which tend to be dealt with in the secret files (*osobaya papka*). The protocols indicate clearly that at least on a formal level the Politburo was supreme. Decrees issued in the name of Sovnarkom or the Central Executive Committee were almost without fail approved beforehand by the Politburo. Politburo decisions might be issued either as Central Committee resolutions, as joint Central Committee–Sovnarkom or government decrees, or even as orders (*prikazy*) of a particular commissariat. The protocols record the Politburo's confirmation of a vast number of nomenklatura appointments, which in most cases had been processed by the party's Orgburo.

The Politburo protocols vividly illustrate how far the system of leadership changed in the decade following Lenin's death. Up until September 1929 collective leadership was based on regular weekly meetings of the Politburo, almost invariably on a Thursday. The main change in the Politburo's power and status came in 1932 and 1933. In 1932 there were forty-seven meetings, but Stalin attended only thirty, being absent from all meetings between June 1 and September 1. In 1933 there were twenty-four meetings, in 1934 only eighteen, in 1935 just fifteen, and in 1936 a mere nine. In the first six months of 1937, six meetings of the Politburo were listed; in the second half of the year none. In 1938 there were four meetings, in 1939 and 1940 just two meetings each.¹¹

11. On the meetings of the Politburo, see E. A. Rees, "Stalin, the Politburo and Rail Transport Policy," in Julian Cooper, Maureen Perrie, and E. A. Rees, eds., *Soviet History, 1917–1953: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 104–7. Khlevnyuk et al., eds., *Stalinskoe Politbyuro v 30-e gody*.

Between Politburo sessions decisions were taken on an almost daily basis through consultation (*opros*) of its members. As the gap between formal sessions increased, this practice was extended, though it meant that a great number of decisions would await formal approval at the next Politburo meeting. The practice of *opros* allowed Politburo members to express their views for or against particular propositions. This right to dissent appears to have been used very rarely, however; in the great majority of cases Politburo members concurred with the proposals put before them.

Politburo commissions, or as sometimes designated, joint Politburo-Sovnarkom commissions, played a key role in decision making and in drafting legislation. In some cases these were virtually permanent bodies, such as the Defense Commission, and after August 1933 the Transport Commission. A key role in shaping the country's foreign trade policy was played by the Commission for Hard Currency. A plethora of Politburo ad hoc committees were charged with processing matters, undertaking inquiries, resolving disputes, and drafting legislation.

Much more work is needed on the papers contained in the special files, on the working papers of the Politburo, and on the papers of the innumerable Politburo commissions before we can speak authoritatively about the way in which this body worked—the influence of individual Politburo members on particular policy issues and their relationship with Stalin.¹²

PARTY DEPARTMENTS

The Party's Orgburo and Secretariat were effectively under Stalin's control from 1922 on, after Stalin was elected General Secretary. These bodies in the past were seen as providing Stalin with his real power base within the central party apparatus, controlling appointments, managing organizational matters, and checking on policy implementation. The archives suggest that the role of these

12. The best and fullest account of the Politburo is O. Khlevnyuk, *Politbyuro: Mekhanizm vlast'* (Moscow, 1998).

bodies may have been exaggerated. From 1929 onward Stalin never attended their formal meetings. The conduct of the sessions of both bodies was entrusted to his lieutenants: Molotov until December 1930, and thereafter Kaganovich. Stalin's absence from these meetings, while reflecting a measure of delegated authority, also indicates clearly the extent to which he already commanded a position of unique authority.¹³

The XVI Party Congress in 1930 elected a Secretariat of five members (K. Ya. Bauman, L. M. Kaganovich, V. M. Molotov, P. P. Postyshev, I. V. Stalin) and two candidates (I. M. Moskin, N. M. Shvernik). The Orgburo consisted of eleven members and four candidates. It was led by the same team as the Secretariat. The sessions of both Orgburo and Secretariat, like those of the Politburo, were attended not only by the members of these bodies but also by members of the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the party control bodies. An attendance of some forty was normal, but in some cases as many as sixty-five are listed as being present. The Orgburo sessions from 1938 onward were chaired by Zhdanov or Malenkov.¹⁴

Like the Politburo, the meetings of both Secretariat and Orgburo, which in the 1920s had been held on a weekly basis, also declined sharply. The main decline, as with the Politburo, came in 1933. From then on, formal sessions of the Secretariat virtually ceased, but the Orgburo continued to hold a limited number of formal sessions through this period. When formal sessions did not take place protocols were still issued for both bodies, recording decisions that had been taken through consultation of their members.¹⁵

The sharp decline of the central party organs in 1933 had a number of causes. It coincided with the famine and the crisis of confidence that this created within the party. The archives give us

13. Rees, "Stalin, the Politburo, and Rail Transport Policy," p. 13, cites RGASPI, 17/113/600 to 17/114/40.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

a fuller picture of the internal opposition groups that arose in this period—the Ryutin group, the Eismont-Tolmachev group. We now have the text of the Ryutin Platform with its scathing denunciation of Stalin from a “Leninist” perspective. External factors may also have played a contributory role, notably the threat of war with Japan in the Far East and Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor of Germany in 1933. With the decline of the central party organs Stalin’s personal dictatorship was consolidated. This involved also a certain streamlining of a decision-making process, which previously had often been cumbersome and slow.

Stalin was anxious to preserve the unity of his ruling group. In 1931 he confided to Kaganovich his concern regarding conflicts between leading Politburo members. Relations between Ordzhonikidze (head of the powerful industrial commissariat) and Molotov (chairman of Sovnarkom) and Kuibyshev (chairman of Gosplan) were extremely fraught. Also, Kuibyshev’s alcoholism raised doubts about his ability to perform his duties. But Stalin’s main fear was that such disputes if left unchecked could lead to a split in the ruling group, which, in Stalin’s words, “was formed historically in the struggle with all forms of opportunism.” Stalin, it appears, counted on Kaganovich to exercise some restraint on his close friend Ordzhonikidze.

Stalin at this time was also concerned with preserving the Politburo’s status as the supreme decision-making body. In September 1931 he voiced alarm at the way Ordzhonikidze sought to raise matters in the Politburo with the aim of revising Sovnarkom decisions and even earlier decisions of the Politburo. He warned Kaganovich that such developments “turns the PB into an organ for rubber stamping the resolutions of [various commissariats]. It is impossible to tolerate these attempts to turn the Central Committee from a leading organ into an organ subordinate to the particular needs of individual commissariats.”¹⁶

Stalin was also anxious to ensure that people of calibre were

16. Rees, ed., *Decision-Making in the Stalinist Command Economy*, p. 16.

retained in the central party organs, so as to ensure that their authority was not diminished. In October 1931 he objected to the suggestion that Postyshev be transferred from the Secretariat to Sovnarkom. In the summer of 1932 Stalin dropped proposals to appoint Kaganovich as general secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party because he feared that this would seriously weaken the central party Secretariat.

HOW STALIN WORKED

A major advance in our understanding of the way in which the decision-making process operated under Stalin was provided with the publication of the diary of those attending the meetings in Stalin's private Kremlin office from 1924 until 1953. In this period Stalin met over 7,000 different people. For senior figures like Molotov the meetings were almost on a daily basis when Stalin was in Moscow. The listing of the people who attended these meetings itself provides a wealth of information, and this information remains to be fully analyzed. In the 1930s real power passed from the Politburo to these face-to-face meetings with Stalin. What is clear is that Stalin was very closely involved in decision making on a day-to-day basis. He was intimately involved in all major policy fields, although not all issues merited his attention. The diary indicates a regular work routine, of almost daily meetings lasting several hours with high-ranking officials in the party, state, economic, military, and security agencies. All the members of the Politburo were in regular attendance. The meetings from the early 1930s onward were usually held in the evenings, often lasting until the early hours of the morning.

From these meetings we have a much clearer picture of the way Stalin worked. Stalin did not rule alone. We can chart the rise and fall of the fortunes of individual leaders (the extraordinary rise of N. I. Ezhov in 1936–1938 to a position of almost second in command, the significant demise of Kaganovich after 1941). We can chart the kind of officials he met. An experiment in

1933–34 to summon republican and regional leaders on a regular basis to these meetings, normally coinciding with Central Committee plenums, quickly fell into abeyance. From 1938 to 1941 Stalin's meetings were largely with defense, military, and security leaders, and also with the directors of defense enterprises, military commanders and specialists (including scientists and inventors), and with regional NKVD operatives. Stalin did not depend solely on the advice offered by agency chiefs, but received information from officials from various levels of the hierarchy.

These meetings in Stalin's office were fundamentally different from the formal meetings of the Politburo in that they conferred on Stalin, in contrast to all his Politburo colleagues, a unique authority and aura of power. In this way he was kept informed of developments in all major policy fields. Senior officials reported directly to him, and they knew that they were liable to be called to account and required to answer personally for the institutions and policy areas for which they were responsible. Decision making became highly personalized. Through these meetings Stalin also gained direct access to lower-level officials, without having to go through any intermediate links.

A further important source of information on the operation of the political leadership in the 1930s is provided by Stalin's correspondence with his two key deputies, Molotov and Kaganovich, during the *vozhd's* prolonged summer vacations from 1930 to 1936. This correspondence further confirms the highly personalized nature of the Stalinist system of rule.¹⁷ Molotov and Kaganovich were Stalin's closest deputies, but they were also keen rivals. Both were capable and hard-working administrators, who contributed in large measure to the shaping of the Stalinist system. Their relationship with Stalin reflects the inner dynamics of the ruling group.

The correspondence is extremely informative. It delves into

17. Lih, Naumov, and Khlevniuk, eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*; Davies et al., eds., *The Stalin-Kaganovich Letters*.

the details of policy decisions across the whole spectrum of issues. Often Stalin personally assumed responsibility for drafting legislation. Even when he was away from the capital Stalin was kept constantly informed on developments; the exchange of letters and telegrams was continuous. Indeed, it was not unusual in periods of intense activity for Stalin and Kaganovich to send each other three or four lengthy telegrams detailing policy issues, in one day. Top-secret correspondence was transported by special couriers. From 1936 onward, communication was increasingly by telephone. From this correspondence we see how Stalin was constantly involved in policy making.

Stalin up to 1936 delegated considerable powers to his Politburo colleagues, but he clearly dominated them, and even the most powerful of those colleagues sought to anticipate and comply with his wishes, and to avoid abrasive arguments. Both Molotov and Kaganovich anxiously solicited Stalin's opinion on matters great and small, constantly reassuring him that they had fully understood and complied with his orders. They sought to influence his views with evidence and argument, but they did not contradict him. They were also quick to bolster his self-esteem with flattery. Like all members of the Politburo they took their cues from Stalin; they desired his approval, they treated him with great respect, and regarded him with a certain awe—and after 1936 with fear.

THE STATE APPARATUS

The state apparatus in the 1930s was headed by the Congress of Soviets and its Central Executive Committee (TsIK)—the Soviet parliament—and by the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom).¹⁸ The system was notable for a near fusion between the ruling party, on the one hand, and the parliament and government on the other. From 1917, state institutions were effectively domi-

18. For Sovnarkom see D. H. Watson, *Molotov and Soviet Government: Sovnarkom 1930–1941* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

nated by the CPSU, although constitutionally these bodies retained a separate identity and their own distinct responsibilities. The Central Executive Committee, supposedly the chief legislative body, to which Sovnarkom was theoretically accountable, was in reality a means of according the regime a semblance of legitimacy.

The formal separation of party and government was reflected in the separation of the leadership of these institutions. Stalin became party General Secretary in 1922. A. I. Rykov replaced Lenin as chairman of Sovnarkom in 1924. In December 1930 Rykov was ousted and Molotov, who had no previous experience of government work, on Stalin's insistence, was appointed chairman of Sovnarkom. This was intended to secure a closer working relationship between the Politburo and government bodies, and to avoid the kind of conflicts that had arisen under Rykov during the struggle with the "Rightists" in 1928–29. Sovnarkom and the commissariats were charged with the task of implementing party policy. There is no evidence that Sovnarkom acted like a cabinet or operated on principles of "collective responsibility"; during the 1930s it was primarily concerned with economic, and to a certain extent social, administration. Although Sovnarkom was formally responsible for the commissariats of foreign affairs, defense, and internal affairs (including security), these key policy areas were always dealt with by the Politburo. Neither Litvinov, commissar of International Affairs, nor Yagoda, commissar of NKVD, was a member of the Politburo, but the great economic controllers (Kuibyshev, Mikoyan, and later on Kaganovich) were all leading members of the Politburo, demonstrating the primacy of economic affairs in politics for at least the first half of the 1930s. The great power wielded by the economic commissariats during the First Five-Year Plan was offset by the burgeoning power of NKVD and the Commissariat of Defense during the second half of the 1930s.

The new joint Sovnarkom–Central Committee decrees issued after 1930 symbolized the new unity of party and state bodies. They were usually signed by Molotov and Stalin, with Molotov

signing first as chairman of Sovnarkom. By 1936 these decrees seem to have been discussed mainly in the Politburo, rather than in Sovnarkom. Sovnarkom was tightly controlled by the Politburo, and Molotov regularly sought approval on “sensitive” issues. The opening of the archives has revealed for the first time the huge volume of decrees issued by Sovnarkom and the Council of Labor and Defense, including a vast number of secret decrees (on this see the Davies chapter).

The Sovnarkom approved by the VI Congress of Soviets on March 18, 1931, consisted of fifteen members, including the chairman (Molotov), three deputy chairmen, and eleven other commissars. The deputy chairmen played an important role: A. A. Andreev headed the state control agency, Kuibyshev headed Gosplan, and Ya. E. Rudzutak (without portfolio) provided support to Molotov. Each of the three deputy chairmen was assigned responsibility for overseeing the work of different commissariats and state commissions and committees.

Sovnarkom had little control over its own membership. Commissars, deputy commissars, and even collegium members of the commissariats were all appointed by the Politburo. Formal meetings of Sovnarkom, which were phased with those of the Politburo and Orgburo, were attended by a large number of individuals. At the thirty-four meetings of Sovnarkom held in 1931 the numbers attending varied between twenty-one and forty-six. Sovnarkom’s chief concern was implementing the annual and quarterly plans, which it discussed with monotonous regularity. Sovnarkom’s plenary session paid little attention to the drafting of the Second Five-Year Plan. Here Gosplan, in consultation with the commissariats, played the main role. Stalin did not always involve himself in the details of policy making, as is shown in the drafting of the Second Five-Year Plan, the details of which were left to be worked out largely by Kuibyshev (head of Gosplan) and Molotov (head of Sovnarkom). General directives for the plan were drafted by the Politburo in consultation with leading commissars in August 1932, and by the XVII Party Confer-

ence in January 1932. The plan was approved by the XVII Party Congress in March 1934, but a further round of consultation occurred before it was finally approved by a Sovnarkom decree in November 1934.

Sovnarkom, like the Politburo, was often overloaded with petty business, which it sought to delegate to other bodies. Sovnarkom had its standing commissions, the most important of which was the Council of Labor and Defense (STO), whose leadership was identical to Sovnarkom, although the division of responsibility between Sovnarkom and STO was never precisely laid down, and the meetings of STO were phased with those of Sovnarkom. Although Stalin was a member of STO from December 1930, he never, with one single exception, attended its meetings. Attached to STO there were a number of commissions and committees (the most important of which was the Committee for Agricultural Procurements), which were more specifically concerned with the management of the economy and brought together representatives from different commissariats to resolve particular problems.

What historians now appreciate, more than ever before, is the sheer volume of work handled by the Politburo and Sovnarkom and by the individual commissariats, and the immense pressure that this placed on individuals and the implications that this carried for decision making and for the control of policy implementation.¹⁹ Notwithstanding these problems, the policy makers in the main were well informed. Decisions were taken in full knowledge of the situation and of their wider implications. At the same time, the range of policy options considered was strongly circumscribed by ideological considerations.

Within that Stalinist system attempts to define constitutionally the respective powers of different institutions became ever more difficult. The boundaries between the political and the administrative realm were obscured. Political debate was increasingly domi-

19. See Rees, ed., *Decision-Making*, pp. 262–74.

nated by problems associated with the management and effective operation of the economy, as well as by questions of defense and internal security. The proliferation of control agencies reflected the problem of regulating relations between institutions, defining their areas of responsibility and ensuring fulfillment of their functions.

CONTROL COMMISSIONS

The Stalinist regime was obsessively concerned with the control and regulation of the activities of subordinates (on this see the chapter by Belova). In particular, the Politburo was intent on ensuring fulfillment of its directives and orders. Investigative commissions headed by Politburo and Central Committee members were regularly dispatched to trouble spots. Party instructors and inspectors performed a constant monitoring role. The Secretariat departments could carry out investigations, request materials and documents, interview commissars and officials, submit reports to higher party organs, and instruct the commissariats as to how policies should be put into effect. The Orgburo controlled appointments of government officials through the nomenklatura system. The Central Committee's specialist Industrial, Agricultural, and Transport sectors often bypassed Sovnarkom and dealt directly with the commissariats.

This system of central control was further tightened in 1933 with the establishment of the political departments (*politotdely*) in the commissariats of agriculture and rail and water transport, headed by their own Political Administrations, which were directly answerable to the party Secretariat. This was based on the model of the militarized administrative system, staffed with army and NKVD personnel, which was first developed during the civil war.

At the XVIII Party Congress in 1934, the powerful party-state control agency (Central Control Commission-Rabkrin), which Stalin had used to defeat his enemies and to shape the policies of

the “revolution from above,” was abolished—primarily because of its failure to ensure effective implementation of official policy during the famine crisis of 1932–33. It was replaced by a new Commission of Party Control (KPK), headed by L. M. Kaganovich, and by a new Commission of Soviet Control (KSK), headed by V. V. Kuibyshev. These bodies reported respectively to the Politburo and Sovnarkom and were charged with ensuring timely and correct implementation of official policy. The regional plenipotentiaries of KPK and KSK were appointed from the center (see again the chapter by Belova). Control within the party itself was tightened with the creation of the central Purge Commission in 1933, which in the following two years carried out a major purge of the party’s ranks. In 1934 the creation of the Central Committee’s Organization of Leading Party Organs (ORPO) established close oversight over the works of republican and regional party organs.

This obsessive concern with control and monitoring was symptomatic of an administrative system under enormous stress. A major cleavage in the Soviet governmental apparatus was that between the economic commissariats on the one hand and the control agencies on the other. The control agencies were often the source of radicalizing influences that led to exaggeration in policy making. The heads of the economic commissariats waged a constant struggle to limit the influence of the control organs within their institutions. With the unleashing of the terror in 1936 this institutional struggle assumed critical importance.

The problem of control was greatly increased with the vast proliferation of commissariats and regional territorial units. Beginning with just one industrial commissariat in 1932, a succession of splits and reorganizations produced a total of twenty-two industrial commissariats by 1941, the main changes coming after 1938. This was paralleled by a fragmentation of the larger territorial administrative regions (*oblasts*), in an effort to make the commissariats and regions more amenable to central directives. But the task of directing, coordinating, and monitoring the work of

this vast state apparatus placed enormous strain on the central party and governmental bodies. The reorganization of Sovnarkom associated with the adoption of the Stalin Constitution of 1936 was an attempt to cope with this burden. In April 1937 STO was abolished and replaced by the Economic Council, which had subcommittees responsible for coordinating the commissariats responsible for different branches of the economy.

Although part of the work was taken over by the central party apparatus, the Politburo, Orgburo, and Secretariat could no longer perform this coordinating and controlling function. The meetings in Stalin's Kremlin office, largely given over to defense and security matters, could not perform this function either. A growing burden of administration was thus inevitably thrown onto the shoulders of Sovnarkom and the governmental apparatus. This posed the danger of isolating Stalin, as supreme leader, from some of the vital functions of government, and it was a situation that could not be allowed to continue for long.

CONCLUSIONS: THE NATURE OF THE STALINIST REGIME

The opening of the archives has made possible a much fuller account of the workings of the party and governmental apparatus in the 1930s. Some of the cherished assumptions about Stalin and his system need to be discarded or qualified. There is no evidence that the political leadership from 1930 onward was divided between a liberal and hard-line faction. On the contrary the leadership appears relatively united, and closely followed Stalin's lead. Stalin was never checked or thwarted by the Politburo. No evidence has yet been found to support the view that there was a conspiracy against Stalin at the XVII Party Congress. Solid evidence implicating Stalin in plotting Kirov's assassination is lacking, although there is abundant evidence to indicate that he took full advantage of the assassination to strengthen his own position.

The new material from the archives also raises questions about the way we conceptualize the Stalinist system. Many of our

past assumptions need to be rethought. The totalitarian model was right in its emphasis on the highly centralized nature of the political system, but it tended toward an oversimplified model of administration. This model underestimated the difficulties of control and the sheer chaos of administration that often interfered with the implementation of policy and produced consequences that were often quite unforeseen. But the “revisionist” approach of the 1980s is also shown to be inadequate, for it tended to emphasize “pluralistic” elements in the system and downplayed the power of the center and of Stalin himself. In spite of the elements of chaos, Stalin was able to manage this apparatus and to impose his will in terms of policy priorities. With the opening of the archives historians face the task of developing a more sophisticated conceptualization of the Stalinist political-administrative system than has yet been devised.

Stalin’s correspondence with Molotov and Kaganovich shows how frankly policy issues were discussed. The private and public discourses of the Stalinist leadership were the same. Their private exchanges are marked by the same preoccupation with wreckers, spies, and dissidents that appears in their public pronouncements. This was part of the mindset of Bolshevism, shared by Stalin and his colleagues.²⁰ What emerges from the correspondence is that they discussed technical questions pertaining to policy in a surprisingly dispassionate and detached manner. On these matters they were sometimes prepared to adjust policy in response to institutional lobbying, but when fundamental issues touching the leadership’s general policy strategy, its basic ideology, or its security were raised the response was implacable.

We now have a much clearer picture of the tone and tenor of government: the crudity of language and expression, the cynicism with which questions of power were discussed, the brutal way in which issues of policy were viewed; the completely unsentimental

20. J. Arch Getty and Oleg Naumov, *The Road to Terror* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 22.

view of the usefulness of people regardless of past service.²¹ We also see how, from 1929 onward, coercion was established as part of the normal functioning of the state: imprisonment, arrest, execution, deportation were used as a way of regulating the society and the apparatus, the degree of intensity calculated according to the needs and objectives of each period.

Stalin's position of supreme power did not mean that he was omniscient or that his will was carried out without question. He relied heavily on his deputies and subordinates; within their own fiefdoms, senior party, government, military, and security chiefs exercised considerable authority. To achieve the results desired, the party-state apparatus had to be constantly prodded, directed, and controlled. Major policy changes required careful management of this apparatus, and in some cases fundamental restructuring and restaffing. Frequently policies were developed as a form of campaign-collectivization, "dekulakization," grain procurement, Stakhanovism, the great purges of 1936–1938. To ensure their success these campaigns had to be organized, objectives determined, agendas set, organizations primed, the right people assigned to the key posts, and public support mobilized.²²

In terms of organization and method, the "Great Terror" of 1936–1938 had already been anticipated in 1928–1932. The earlier purge trials show Stalin's central role in organization to rid the regime of its opponents and critics; they show the farce of political "trials" in which the Politburo had already decided the sentence in advance; the use of tactics to discredit opponents within the party, including the use of scapegoats to distract public attention, and mass mobilization and the mass promotion of new strata of personnel as a means of controlling the apparatus.

Throughout his rule Stalin dominated the policy-making proc-

21. R. W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (London: Macmillan, 1997), chap. 12, "Stalin and His Entourage."

22. On the management of the party-state apparatus, see E. A. Rees, "Stalinism: The Primacy of Politics," in John Channon, ed., *Politics, Society, and Stalinism in the USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

ess, but he never sought to monopolize decision making in a simple sense. He saw advantages in involving others in resolving policy issues, and the meetings in his Kremlin office served this purpose. Individuals could be excluded. But on key issues such as foreign, defense, and security policy Stalin sought to involve his Politburo colleagues. Not only Stalin's deputies, but individual commissars and republican and regional party bosses were expected, and required, to show initiative, but always as proof of their unquestioning loyalty to the leader. The terms in which debate was conducted were thus severely circumscribed.

But if the trappings of Politburo rule were retained throughout the Stalin era in that major policy pronouncements were made in the Politburo's name, the term "Politburo decision" should be used with great caution. Even before 1936 the Politburo effectively rubber-stamped decisions, after 1936 the Politburo existed largely only in name. To all intents and purposes, the Soviet Union already from 1933 was under Stalin's personal dictatorship. This does not mean that other leaders were unimportant, or that there was no consultation, but Stalin was the supreme authority, whom no one could contradict. There were no mechanisms whereby Stalin could be outvoted or removed from office. Thus the terror of 1936–1938 did not create the Stalin dictatorship, it only transformed an existing dictatorship into a tyranny, in which terror was a central component, where even those closest to Stalin were no longer secure, and in which key institutions and their leaders (particularly on defense and internal security matters) answered directly to Stalin.

The problems of controlling the party-state apparatus came to dominate the concerns of the political leadership. This was reflected in the progressive strengthening of the institutions of control and surveillance, especially the NKVD. The "Great Terror" of 1936–1938 was in large measure a response to the leadership's anxieties regarding the loyalty and competence of this apparatus. Stalin's role in initiating, directing, and controlling the purge was

central.²³ Though the motives behind the terror remain a matter of debate, its outcome was a huge turnover in the ruling elite.²⁴

The purge further strengthened Stalin's hand but in the process raised fundamental questions about the role of the Politburo and its continuing usefulness. On May 6, 1941, Molotov (already burdened with his responsibilities as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs since his appointment in 1939) was relieved as chairman of Sovnarkom; Stalin took over the chairmanship. In the weeks preceding the German invasion, Stalin continued to use the meetings in his Kremlin office to shape policy, but he also increasingly used Sovnarkom, in place of the Politburo, as the main organizational power center. He retained his position as head of both the party and government until his death in 1953.

The new archival material makes possible comparisons between systems, particularly between the Soviet and other authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. Stalin, in sharp contrast to Hitler, was not a "lazy dictator." The cult that surrounded Stalin, as Kershaw argues, was an accretion on the communist system, in contrast to cult of the Fuhrer, which was a fundamental component of Nazism. The Soviet ruling group was not riddled with the deep personal and institutional conflicts that characterized the Nazi regime, but factional and institutional conflicts were rife. The Soviet political system was also more streamlined. In the period up to 1939, at least, the record of the Soviet regime in its treatment of its own citizens was far worse than that of the Nazi regime. The Soviet regime's brutal treatment of its own personnel, party, state, and military officials during the Great Purges of 1936–1939 had no parallel in the history of the Nazi regime.²⁵

At the heart of the Stalinist system lay a central dilemma. Hav-

23. O. Khlevnyuk, "The Motives Behind the Great Purges, 1936–38," in Cooper, Perrie, and Rees, *Soviet History, 1917–1953*, pp. 158–76.

24. Evan Mawdsley and Stephen White, *The Soviet Elite from Lenin to Gorbachev: The Central Committee and Its Members 1917–1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

25. See Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

ing created a highly centralized, bureaucratized party-state apparatus the system faced the danger that this apparatus would increasingly deprive the political leadership of the ability to control and direct policy along the channels that it sought. The concentration of power in Stalin's hands, the resort to terror, the administrative juggling with the powers of different institutions not only represented Stalin's aspiration to increase his personal power, it also represented a means of ensuring that the bureaucracy was kept at the service of the leadership and did not become the master. The dramatic way in which Stalin's leadership changed in this period, from oligarchy to dictatorship to tyranny, needs to be related to Stalin's own aspirations and the nature of the regime's ideology, but it also needs to be understood in relation to the wider problems of governing the Soviet state.